

JIMMY WILLIAMS had been a cynic for as many of his thirteen years as he could remember.

Not that most children aren't born with a healthy and functional "Built-In Shit Detector," the *sine qua non* of cynicism in its purest form. But by the time they reach puberty, most children have been successfully trained in self-deception by their elders, and have learned that although a B.I.S.D. can never be shut off, it can be easily ignored with the aid of certain liquids, vapors and pills.

Jimmy, however, was plenty tough. It would be years before the bitter pain of being a one-eyed man in the country of the blind succeeded in blinding his eyes, gagging his mouth, and mortally wounding his self-respect. At the moment, the impassioned words of a larger-than-life senatorial candidate on the Screen filled him with an amused contempt.

"DEMOCRACY," boomed the phosphor-dot phantom, "IS RUN BY ALL, YET RUN DOWN BY MANY. THE SUBLIMELY OBVIOUS TRUTH THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL APPARENTLY IS NOT OBVIOUS ENOUGH FOR SOME. SEEING THEMSELVES AS A SORT OF POLITICAL ELITE, THESE ARROGANT ARTISTS OF ANARCHY WOULD PLACE THEMSELVES AND THEIR OWN OPINIONS ABOVE THE SACRED WILL OF THE PEOPLE, THE

VIRILE, DRIVING FORCE WHICH DISTILLED THIS GREAT NATION OF OURS FROM THE CHAOS WHICH HAD GONE BEFORE. AS FOR . . ." Jimmy turned down the volume. ". . . myself, I can see no reason why I should be other than honored and proud to take the will of the people for my own, and subordinate my desires to those of the body politic. Indeed, it would be a rare . . ."

Jimmy's amusement and contempt were gradually giving way to an impatient irritability. The politician had ceased to be funny; was becoming odious.

"Screw it," he said aloud, and the Screen vanished, was replaced by the far wall of Jimmy's bedroom. He regarded the wall for a moment, wishing for the thousandth time that he could put up some sort of poster-type decoration on its blank grey surface without having to get up and remove the stuff every time he wanted to use the Screen. He had heard that next year's model would not be subject to molecular distortion as was this one—but he had also heard that Prosperity was Just Around the Corner. Jimmy believed only in what he could see—and damned little of that.

Right now, Jimmy wanted desperately to believe that his father would be coming home tonight. Sergeant William's Tac Squad had been called up at dawn to assist in quelling a riot in the Wyandanch Ghetto, involving some two or three thousand people, and an hour's monitoring of the newscasts had brought Jimmy nothing with any more calories than the democracy-loving politician.

That was bad.

Jimmy loved his father quite a bit, a fact which irritated him immensely whenever he became consciously aware of it. It annoyed him to love someone who was quite capable of ending an argument with, "There is no reason. Do it my way," particularly because experience had shown him that when his father said that, he nearly always turned out to be right. A *fiat* was galling; a correct and prudent *fiat* was maddening.

Perhaps what annoyed him the most, however, was that his father would accept, at times, the *fiats* of others—which seemed to Jimmy a kind of betrayal. The time Sgt. Williams had knuckled under to a meddling neighbor and a Town Zoning Board, obeying the order of the latter to tear down Jimmy's "nonconforming" tree-house, had nearly destroyed their relationship. The boy still did not understand his father's concept of duty, but on the night six months later when he had come home to find his father sprawled whitefaced on the living-room carpet, sobbing to Jimmy's mother of the slaughter he had done that day in society's name, Jimmy had learned that whatever the nature of this weakness, it was beyond his father's ability to fight.

Jimmy was determined to be tougher. Society gave him a pain behind the lap.

Democracy, he thought, remembering the politician who had annoyed him. *How can something sound so good and work out so lame?* The lad had recognized the politician's words as bullshit by their sound alone, but he could not have answered them as arguments. He had audited a reasonable number of

Eyecon courses for a boy of his age, but he was too young to take Political Rhetoric just yet, and he had never cared enough to ask his father to help him get a waiver.

But the challenge appealed to him in his present state of mind.

Let's see, Jimmy thought. *First he talked about how all men are created equal. . . .*

That was a tricky one. Jimmy himself had some reason to believe that all men might be in fact created equal. Had he not himself been classified, at the age of three, as an "innate underachiever" by the Eyecon psychologists? And had he not, under the stimulus of his father's meaty right hand, gone on to achieve Magna Cum Laude status in his fourth, fifth and sixth years? "They tried to tell me you wasn't as good as everybody else," his father had whispered savagely to him once, when he was thought too young to understand, "but I say that's crap. Everybody gets the same chance to make something of themselves, and by God we're gonna prove it to 'em, you and me."

And yet Jimmy also remembered his father saying once, "What I do for my keep is my business, kid. What you do for your keep is mow the lawn. What do you think this family is, anyway, a democracy?"

Jimmy had been taking an Eyecon Sociology course at the time, and he had asked his real professor about his father's words during the question and answer period. The little grey man on the screen had closed his eyes and said tonelessly, "Democracy is not a feasible form of government for a social group as small as the family. In a group of that size a single individual becomes a special-interest group—any two of them can become an unbeatable axis. It is in the vast numbers of people which characterize a viable democracy that individual interests and inadequacies cancel out, and the common good can ..." But at that point question and answer period ended, and the real professor's face was supplanted by the more familiar cartoon professor who couldn't hear you.

Now that Jimmy came to think of it, however, Eyecon had a sort of vested interest in democracy. The leap of companies like Eyeball Consolidated and Telemat from cable television franchises to complete information networks had been duplicated in the socialist countries of the world, but it had taken the free enterprise systems of America and Japan to create them in the first place. Their vast Screen empires and their shotgunning diversification had been sparked by competition, and only in a democracy is big-time competition open to more than a chosen few.

Perhaps it was no wonder that the real professor, one of the lucky few who had landed a job with a Screen company when the bottom fell out of the education market, was an apologist for democracy.

The hell with it, Jimmy thought. *I'll see if there's anything on the news now*. He was getting really worried about his father.

"...quality listing is given as highly unsatisfactory, so be sure to bring your mask along if you go outside today. Our weather-watch also informs us that today's radiation level readings throughout the tri-city area are 'no cause for alarm,' thanks to the valiant efforts of the Atomic Energy Commission's emergency crews. And now for a full report here is Snaker De Landro from Gardiner's Island."

The moon-faced man on the wall was replaced by a lean, ascetic-looking man with straggly black hair and a goatee.

"Right, Wally. 'Valiant efforts' ain't no lie at all; I mean, these guys are really together out here, you know? The man says all you people on the other side of the Screen can pretty much walk around outside in street clothes if you want to, as long as the wind's northeast. And when it isn't, light body armor should be more than adequate.

"Look, lemme lay some background on ya, case ya forgot, all right? Maybe you remember the big hassle LILCo first had when they tried to go atomic, that Shoreham deal? They tried to tell everybody that a nuclear power plant on Long Island Sound was harmless t'the ecology. *Get bent*, we said, you and me, but before long it started to look like they was right when they said they couldn't keep our air-conditioners and Screens working without some big-ass plant someplace. So we give 'em Gardiner's Island, and everybody's happy except maybe Gardiner, right? *Now* look what happens. Place is so close to the mainland you could row out there, and they can't run a power-line that don't break. Governor fails and BLOOIE!

"Well, what I want to know is when do I get my air-conditioning back? I mean, you people out there on the other side got—"

"Screw it," said Jimmy angrily, and Snaker De Landro was exorcised. *If all men are created equal, how come Eyecon's House-Hippie Newsman is such an idiot?*

Jimmy had seen Telemat's House Hippie, at the house of a friend whose parents subscribed to Eye-con's Japanese rival, and *he* hadn't sounded like a case of terminal brain damage. Perhaps that really was one of the advantages of a democracy, with the custard-heads being canceled out in the long run. In a totalitarian government, one idiot with a bent for power-collection could take-over and rule for a lifetime—at least Jimmy's country shuffled the idiots every few years.

Why then did the system still seem to work so poorly?

Jimmy decided to ask the Brain. "Brain?" he said.

The word "CODE" appeared on the Screen wall, with a question mark a second later.

Jimmy frowned. Tapping the brain required a surcharge authorization, and Jimmy's father was not aware that he knew the authorization-code.

He decided to settle that problem when the bill came.

"Williams 245T-Bridgeport 77R . . ." he checked the calendar, . . . 36D."

"WAITING," said the wall in foot-high computerscript.

"Input idiomatic English—same response mode," said Jimmy. That' would keep it simple enough for him to understand.

"WAITING," the wall repeated. Eyecon's brain was flexible indeed, constituting one of the firm's biggest selling-points. To tap into the Eyecon grid was to gain access to a computer which was the equal of MENTOR in Washington, capable of accepting programs in nearly any known language, human or computer. The Eyecon System didn't just bring you entertainment and present you with shopping options at home or guard the house while you were elsewhere, it answered your questions for you, with the best answers available at the moment. Certain categories, of course, were restricted, and if the fail-safes caught a schoolboy tapping the brain for homework answers they doubled the bill for the course (" . . . right in the small print, sir, and you must agree it is for your own protection . . ."), but any legitimate query would be honored.

"Computer," said Jimmy ritually, "what, if anything, is inherently wrong with the democratic system of governing people?"

The computer answered.

Jimmy frowned. *Must be too many ambiguities to phrase it right in English* he thought. *Damn.* Jimmy's Fortran was not what it perhaps should have been.

But he tried just the same, using the instruction manual bolted to the Screen's operations console by his bed. The vocabulary barely included enough concepts to make his query intelligible; at least he would have the luxury of an idiomatic reply.

The second answer, being the same, pleased him no more than the first. He must be screwing up.

The hell with it, Jimmy thought, and switched to news so impatiently that he forgot to hit the "Clear" switch for the Brain first. A newscaster's excited features superimposed themselves over the Brain's computerscript answer, obscuring it. Jimmy sat up—this was it.

" . . . seen anything like it here at the Wyandanch Public Housing Complex. Last week's events pale into insignificance before the concentrated violence and savagery of this bitter confrontation. The body count so far as we can determine here in the field has already gone well above the previous record of 213, with the majority of them . . . uh . . . minority members. Heavier police firepower seems to have carried the day.

"But what the rioters lack in armament they make up for in ferocity. Of the 97 officers killed here today, 34 were literally torn to pieces when they were surprised outside the Interdicted Zone by a faction of radicals. Radical charges of police brutality are unverified at this time.

"Those interested in a casualty readout should activate channel 37, 19 or for /hose of you in outlying areas, channel 2K. Radical casualties on the left . . ." the 'caster grinned sardonically, " . . . and police casualties on the right."

Jimmy hastily slapped the 2K switch. The newscast shrunk inward, and lists of names began to march up the wall on either side of it. Torn to pieces!

His ears roared as the right hand list ended, scuttling up into the ceiling without having named his father. The roar eventually dopplered down into the 'caster's voice, calmer now.

"... at hand is, of course, difficult to say at this time. The radicals, as usual, claim a moral victory, but it seems as if the central issue of today's demonstration, a step-up in garbage pickup to biweekly, will be denied them all the same. Housing Administrator Blasi has vowed 'never to knuckle under to armed dissent unless it should be in the interests of the Federal Public Housing Program.' So it seems there'll be no joy in the Wyandanch toni . . ."

The door of Jimmy's room opened; Sgt. Williams stood in the doorway, his uniform jacket unbuttoned and bloody. Jimmy started to kill the Screen, barely remembering in time to use his alternate cue. "Cease," he said, and the newscast ceased.

"Evening, son," said Sgt. Williams wearily. "How's it going on the home front?"

"Okay, Pop. How'd it go today?"

"Pretty rough. Kelly—you remember him?—caught a slug. Took his face clean off." Sgt. Williams looked at his boots, rubbed the doorframe as though it were his wife's shoulder. "When I think of what we went through, to keep a couple of politicians from losing face . . ." He shook his head. "But, I guess we gotta protect and preserve society, even the screwy parts, eh, Jimbo?"

"Guess so, Pop."

Sgt. Williams sighed, looked around the room. "What's this? Playing with the brain?"

Jimmy realized suddenly that the computer's last answer was waiting there on the wall for him to hit the "clear" switch, and breathed a blasphemy. Caught red-handed!

"Uh . . . yeah, Pop. I was just . . . fooling around." He waited for the explosion, already wondering what his punishment would be.

But the weary man in the doorway didn't seem to have an explosion in him. "Don't do that without asking, Jimmy. It's okay, I can see by the answer you got that you didn't cost us any money—no charge for nulls. But next time you might run up quite a bill, and your allowance won't cover it. Don't let it happen again, all right?"

He turned and walked from the room, but his muffled "Good night," got no response from Jimmy, for Jimmy had just realized in a blinding flash that his father was wrong, that they would get a bill for his questioning of the computer after all. The Brain had not refused to answer, it had simply answered as correctly and concisely as it knew how.

For Jimmy had asked it:

"What is wrong with the democratic form of government?"

And the Brain, apparently considering computerman's slang as idiomatic, had answered; "G.I.G.O."—that is, "garbage in, garbage out."